

KPBS

City Council Votes To Go Ahead With Recycled Water Demonstration Project

By [Alison St John](#)
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The city of San Diego will move ahead with a pilot project to test the viability of recycling sewage water to make it fit to drink.

Recycling things like paper and plastic has become not only acceptable, but desirable, whereas recycling water to drinkable standards has met fierce resistance. The San Diego City Council's decision to award a contract for a pilot project suggests the unfortunate expression "toilet to tap" may have been flushed out.

City Council President Ben Hueso congratulated his colleagues on the 6-to-2 vote.

"Only a few years ago there were only three votes on the council to move this project forward," he said. "There was enormous opposition to this. Now not one speaker speaking in opposition to this. We've made enormous progress."

Judy Swink of [Citizens Coordinate for Century 3](#) was one of 18 people who showed up to support the demonstration project. She said the citizen planning group had written recommendations for recycling water as far back as 1977, stating strongly that the San Diego region cannot afford to dump such a valuable resource into the ocean.

"And here we are," Swink said, "33 years later, still dumping it."

An unusual coalition of groups came together to speak in favor of building the demonstration project to test what is known as [Indirect Potable Reuse](#), recycling sewer water to drinkable standards.

Environmental groups like [Surfrider](#) and [Coastkeeper](#) were joined by people like Amy Harris of the [San Diego Taxpayers Association](#).

Harris pointed out that the county water authority expects water rates to double by 2018.

“This is a sobering fact,” she said. “The San Diego region cannot sustain these water rate increases and continue to import the amount of water that we do, and taxpayers have been paying for this project through water rate increases that were activated in 2009. So I think it’s about time to get to the test, make it happen, see if it’s a good idea.”

City Councilwoman Donna Frye joked that she had been fighting for full water recycling since she was nine years old, but Councilman Tony Young was one of those who said he has only just come around to the idea, after looking into the science of it. He also wanted to know that city staff had done outreach in his community, like setting up classes at the [Elementary Institute of Science](#) in District 8.

“I have not given my full support -- until today,” Young said. “And I will support not only this project but will support the concept of indirect potable reuse in the future, so that we can try to address our water needs comprehensively in the City of San Diego.”

Councilmembers like Marti Emerald were careful to point out that public education is a key element of the demonstration project. Unless the public accepts the idea, it may not be politically palatable.

“The test site will also be open to the public?” she asked.

“That’s correct,” city project leader, Marsi Steirer assured her. “As part of our public outreach program, tours will be available. The plant will be operational by next April.”

“So school kids can go on outings and learn about this,” Emerald said, “and I’m sure they’ll think it’s pretty cool.”

But two councilmembers, Carl DeMaio and Sherri Lightner, still don’t think it’s cool enough to vote for. Lightner doesn’t want to see water recycling put ahead of other strategies to tackle a future water shortage.

“I cannot support this demonstration project,” Lightner said, “unless it is a part of a comprehensive plan for a sustainable water future, which would include gray water, nonpotable recycled water, desalination, storage and conservation projects that are already tested and proven options.”

Councilman Kevin Faulconer also made his support conditional. Even though he went to visit a similar water recycling project already in full production in Orange County, he says he's only ready to support the demonstration project because the resulting water won't actually go into San Diego's drinking water supply. It will be part of the city's existing water recycling project, which is not processed to drinking standards and can only be distributed through a separate system of purple pipes.

"I remain to be convinced that this is a safe source of drinking water for San Diegans," Faulconer said. "But I will move forward with the pilot project to help get those answers today."

Council President Ben Hueso called it a big day for San Diego.

"Whereas right now the people setting the price of our water are outside our county, outside our region," he said, "we could go a long way in making sure San Diegans have a voice in the cost of the water that they pay for and that they drink."

The demonstration project costs \$11 million in total, though the contract awarded yesterday to build the plant is for \$6.6 million. If it's successful, and state regulatory agencies give it their blessing, the city will be a little more in control of its own water destiny. But deciding to make recycled water part of the city's drinking water supplies is still a long way down the river.